

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

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PLEASE PASS TO HOLLEY MACK BELL

FOLLOWING REPEATS BOGOTA 6902 ACTION USIA INFO SECSTATE 8 JUL 76

QUOTE BOGOTA 6902

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USIA FOR ILA, IPS; SECSTATE FOR ARA/DEVINE

EO 11652: NA

SUBJ: GOC SUSPENSION OF UPI IN COLOMBIA

1. ON JULY 2, UPI OFFICE IN BOGOTA TELEXED FLASH MESSAGE TO NEW YORK OFFICE STATING "PRESIDENT LOPEZ MICHELSEN HAS BEEN ASSASSINATED." BEFORE ITEM WAS KILLED NINE MINUTES LATER, THE NY OFFICE HAD TRANSMITTED IT WORLD-WIDE AND SEVERAL RADIO AND TELEVISION STATIONS CARRIED THE ITEM. EFE NEWS AGENCY ELABORATED ON THE STORY CLAIMING LOPEZ HAD BEEN KILLED BY GUERRILLAS AND THAT ITEM HAD BEEN OFFICIALLY CONFIRMED.

2. LATE EVENING JULY 3, GOC MINCOMMUNICATIONS SIGNED ORDER SUSPENDING UPI ACTIVITY IN COLOMBIA AND REVOKING UNCLASSIFIED

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LOCAL EFE CHIEF'S CREDENTIALS FOR OPERATING IN COLOMBIA.

3. UPI DIRECTOR IN COLOMBIA PIETER VANBRENNENKON CLAIMS ERROR WAS CAUSED BY PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEE PRACTISING ON MACHINES WHO INADVERTENTLY TRANSMITTED THE MESSAGE. LOCAL EFE DIRECTOR GUILLERMO TRIRIN INSISTS THAT WASHINGTON OFFICE ELABORATED ON THE UPI STORY RECEIVED STATESIDE.

4. PRESS SOURCES WHO TALKED WITH LOPEZ SATURDAY PM SAY THAT PRESIDENT DOUBTED THAT ERROR WAS INADVERTENT AND BELIEVED THAT THE ITEM WAS PART OF A "CONTINUAL PLOT TO DAMAGE HIS NAME IN THE FOREIGN MEDIA." LOPEZ WAS REPORTEDLY EXTRAORDINARILY ANGRY AND QUITE SERIOUS IN HIS INTENTION TO OUST THE UPI.

5. INCIDENT HAS RECEIVED VERY HAVY PRESS, RADIO AND TV COVERAGE, INCLUDING EL TEMPO AND EL ESPECTADOR EDITORIALS CALLING FOR RECONSIDERATION AND MODERATION ON PART OF PRESIDENT LOPEZ. LOCAL PRESS ORGANIZATIONS HAVE ALSO SUPPORTED UPI AND EFE.

6. UPI MANAGER FOR LA HIPPAU AND NEWS MANAGER MCREYNOLDS ARRIVED FROM BUENOS AIRES MONDAY PM TO BEGIN TALKS WITH GOC. TUESDAY PM MEETING MINCOMMUNICATIONS GAVIRIA CONFIRMED THAT UPI COULD CONTINUE OPERATING AS USUAL UNTIL NORMAL APPEALS PROCEDURES ARE COMPLETED. PRESIDENT LOPEZ HAS AGREED TO MEET WITH HAPPAU AND MCREYNOLDS FRIDAY, JULY 9.

COMMENT: INDICATIONS ARE THAT UPI AND EFE VERSIONS OF INCIDENT ARE TRUE, AND THAT WEIRD CHAIN OF COINCIDENCES RESULTED IN THE NEWS ITEM ACTUALLY BEING RELEASED BY UPI IN NY. INCIDENT HAS NONETHELESS RESULTED IN ONE OF THE BIGGEST FLAPS UPI HAS SEEN IN SOME ITEM. THE STORY TOUCHED A SENSITIVE CHORD IN PRESIDENT LOPEZ WHO HAS BEEN CRITICAL OF HIS AND COLOMBIA'S IMAGE IN FOREIGN MEDIA FOR SOME TIME (REDA HIS LETTER TO NY TIMES LAST SEPTEMBER RE U.S. MAFIA ENCOURAGING DRUG TRAFFIC IN COLOMBIA AND BLACKENING GOC IMAGE, PLUS OTHER LESS PUBLICIZED CRITICISM OF FOREIGN PRESS).

IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT AS FLAP DIES DOWN AND UPI AND EFE UNCLASSIFIED

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MAKE THEIR APOLOGIES, THE UPI AND EFE'S TRIBIN WILL BE REINSTATED, BUT INDICATIONS ARE THAT THEY ARE BEING MADE TO FEEL THE HEAT OF LOPEZ'S ANGER FOR A WHILE.

THE INCIDENT MAY COME UP AT THE UNESCO MEETING BEGINNING JULY 12 IN COSTA RICA WHERE IT COULD BE CITED BY OTHERS AS AN EXAMPLE OF "IRRESPONSIBILITY" ON THE PART OF U.S. NEWS AGENCIES, THUS ADDING FUEL TO THEIR

ARGUMENTS.

WILL ADVISE ON OUTCOME OF PRESIDENTIAL MEETING ON FRIDAY.

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